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ABSTRACT

An inservice training program designed to enhance the ability of both regular and special educators to successfully function as placement team members is described. The program features introductory needs assessment, focus of initial activities on leadership personnel, an emphasis on collaboration in decisionmaking and sharing, demonstration of competence by inservice trainers, collaborative evaluation intended for program improvement, and intrinsic incentives for participation. The approach is job-embedded; intact placement teams receive training on improving their performance with actual cases. (CL)

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A School-based Inservice Training Program For Special Education Placement Teams

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ABSTRACT

A SCHOOL BASED INSERVICE TRAINING

PROGRAM FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

PLACEMENT TEAMS

Federal and state regulations have specified the responsibilities of special education placement teams for the identification, programming and placement of handicapped students. Although the successful functioning of these teams is critical to the provision of a "free appropriate education", the literature is replete with concerns about inadequate diagnostic data, limited participation by some personnel, ineffective decision making and inappropriate placements. An inservice training program characterized by observation and critique of actual team meetings is described. Detailed information on how to implement this training in an efficient and cost effective manner is presented.

A School-based Inservice Training Program for Special Education Placement Teams

The regulations for the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) and resulting State legislation required the use of multidisciplinary teams for the identification, diagnosis, planning and implementation of programs for handicapped students. It was suggested that group decision making by a special education placement team as opposed to a unilateral decision maker would enhance communication, facilitate the development and evaluation of an individual education plan (IEP) and provide for a more appropriate placement. A few studies have supported the efficacy of multidisciplinary team decision making. Vautour (1977) found that teams do place handicapped students in more appropriate placements than individuals. He also indicated that the most knowledgeable team member exerts the most influence on the team decision. Similarly, Pfeiffer and Naglieri (1983) found that teams exhibited significantly less variability in placement decisions than the same specialists acting independently. They also reported that no one professional group dominated the multidisciplinary team decision-making process.

In spite of the data on the general efficacy of the team approach, there are increasing numbers of studies suggesting that there are critical problems mitigating against the smooth operation of special education teams. These concerns include:

1. The way diagnostic data is presented has a direct impact on placement decisions (Goldbaum, 1977).
2. There is a bias against regular classroom teacher participation in team deliberations (Yoshida, Fenton, Maxwell & Kaufman, 1977).

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3. Professionals on placement teams are more interested in "telling" parents than listening to parent input (Trailor, 1982).
4. Team members are not clear regarding their role on the team (Ysseldyke, Algozzine & Mitchell, 1982).
5. Team members are not encouraged to participate or contribute to the decision-making process (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Allen, 1980).
6. Special services professionals use technical terms and jargon not clear to parents and many regular educators (Ysseldyke, Algozzine and Mitchell, 1982).
7. In making placements, there is little discussion of least restrictive environment or the efficacy of a placement or even a determination of team agreement (Ysseldyke, Algozzine & Mitchell, 1982).
8. Only one placement option is usually presented (Applied Management Sciences, 1979).
9. There is often little relationship between the data presented at the team meeting and the placement decision reached by the team (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey & Graden, 1982).
10. Placement teams often use data for decision making which is derived from technically inadequate tests (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Regan & Potter, 1979).
11. Several studies have reported that approximately half the placement decisions made by special education teams are inappropriate (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1981; Shepard & Smith, 1981).

These concerns must be addressed since the effectiveness of special education placement teams determines, to a considerable extent, whether a school has an appropriate special education program. In addition, a number of critical issues

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facing special education are centered on placement team functioning.

The Sixth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of Public Law 94-142: The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1984) emphasized that the "quality and scope of the decision-making process are critical to the implementation of the LRE provisions of the Act" (p. 40). It went on to note that SEA's and LEA's are attempting to improve the quality of the placement decision making process. The report also discussed the related concern regarding the increase in the learning disabilities count. Again, a major focus the report cited was attempts "to prevent erroneous classification" by placement teams (p. 44). Other issues, including the appropriateness and utility of IEP's, the adequacy of diagnostic assessments, and teacher stress and burnout (Shaw, Bensky & Dixon, 1980) and the cost of special education services are directly related to placement team functioning.

It is clear that action needs to be taken to remove the impediments to effective team functioning. Algozzine, Christenson and Ysseldyke (1982) have indicated that teacher trainers must modify preservice programs to provide more appropriate information to prospective educators on the referral to placement process. In addition, an inservice training component is necessary if we are to reach those professionals already functioning on placement teams. Smith-Davis, Burke and Noel (1984) report that their survey of all fifty states indicates that regular educators and administrators are the greatest single thrust of inservice concerning education of the handicapped. A major emphasis of this training is the determination of who is handicapped and who is not. An effective inservice training program to enhance the ability of both regular and special educators to successfully function as placement team members will now be described.

INSERVICE TRAINING

Although inservice training for placement teams is certainly needed, many current inservice programs and approaches present many more problems than solutions. Wood and Thompson (1980) characterized most inservice training as irrelevant, ineffective and a waste of time and limited resources. It is imperative that inservice training programs for teams adhere to stringent quality standards if the problems outlined above are to be avoided.

In an analysis of inservice training programs Cline (1984) specified data based quality practices including the following:

- the program is complex and ambitious
- the program is based on assessed needs
- administrative support is apparent
- collaboration in decision making and planning
- school site is the locus of training
- trainers are competent
- incentives for participation

One additional quality indicator relates to the delivery mode of the training. Joyce, McNair, Diaz and McKibbin (1976) noted that relevant inservice training is most likely to occur when it is provided in a job-embedded or job-related mode. One of the first and most comprehensive placement team training programs is the Child Study Team Training Program developed by Vautour and Rucker (1977). Although there is considerable data supporting the effectiveness of this program (Bensky, 1980; Tichnor, 1980), Trailor (1982) noted the importance of job-imbedded training. Trailor used the Child Study Team Training Program to successfully train regular classroom teachers in effective placement team involvement, but found that other team members did not encourage

the active participation of their newly trained colleagues. Trailor indicated that the effective participation of these teachers would soon wash out unless the entire team could be trained.

Observation, Critique and Evaluation of Placement Team Meetings

The placement team inservice training program to be described has been implemented in a range of school districts from rural areas with only two schools to large urban districts with several dozen schools. The size and needs of each school system result in variations, but the typical sequence of planning and inservice activities are specified in Tables 1 and 2. The actual inservice program will be described in relation to the quality inservice practices specified previously.

The Program is Complex and Ambitious

Although the critical element of this inservice is the actual observation and critique of placement team meetings, other more formal training sessions are provided. Virtually every relevant constituency in the school system from the Board of Education to regular and special education direct service personnel receive training. While the

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placement team observations are intended to teach new skills, the training sessions provide administrative support and understanding as well as dealing with modifications in policy, procedures and staffing.

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The Program is Based on Assessed Needs

Table 1 indicates that the needs assessment comes before the involvement of the trainer. Usually an internal assessment done by the special education administrator or a compliance review by the State Education Agency (SEA) has specified the problem areas. If an adequate needs assessment has not been done, the trainer's review of local placement team procedures, random student records and possibly the observation of several team meetings can provide sufficient baseline data.

Administrative Support is Apparent

The initial planning and inservice activities are focused on leadership personnel. The intent of these meetings is to achieve understanding of the problem and commitment to solutions. Prior to beginning the placement team observations the "independent" trainer must have approval to provide for sharing the evaluation report with all relevant personnel and good faith administrative efforts to implement necessary changes. In addition, a central office administrator (probably the Sp. Ed. Director) must be willing to attend the post observation training sessions to discuss the trainer's recommendations.

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Collaboration in Decision Making and Planning

This entire inservice effort is characterized by the trainer sharing objective information and recommendations with each constituency. Each of the inservice activities specified in Table 2 is an attempt at problem solving in which the trainer identifies the problem, suggests alternative solutions and then supports school personnel in formulating an action plan.

In addition to the joint planning activities specified in Table 1, collaboration is required by the fact that individual schools are given the option of inviting the trainer to observe team meetings. At the review session following the team observations, school personnel are encouraged to share problems and propose solutions for inclusion in the final evaluation.

School Site Is the Locus of Training

Not only is the major activity in this inservice program building based but it is also job-embedded. Intact placement teams receive training on improving their performance on actual cases. Teams, as a whole, get feedback and direction regarding diagnostic evaluations, IEP's, and annual reviews they have completed. They get expert answers to practical questions they raise regarding regulations, policy and procedures.

Trainers are Competent

At this point in time a college professor acting as an inservice trainer for a local school district must be willing and able to overcome the "ivory tower" perception by demonstrating competence. In this case the trainer has had experience developing placement team guidelines for an SEA, and has participated in hundreds of placement team meetings in dozens of school districts. The attribute participants most appreciate, however, is his experience as a State Hearing Officer for special education due process appeals.

Cost effective alternatives for consultant help for this inservice include free technical assistance from the SEA or two experienced special education administrators who have been trained in placement team processes exchanging the training responsibilities in their respective districts.

Evaluation is Collaborative and Focused on Program Improvement

The evaluation resulting from this program is a list of data-based problem summaries with recommendations for solutions. The list of problems is primarily developed by LEA personnel based upon the needs assessment data and interviews

with placement team members. The trainer's review of records and placement team observations provides voluminous data on the nature and severity of the problems, as well as identifying additional problems. Discussions with placement team members and post observation training sessions encourage problem solving and concensus building. The final evaluation report is officially the responsibility of the trainer but it is undoubtedly an action oriented plan for program improvement developed with input from every constituency in the school system.

Incentives for Participation

The incentive for participation in this training endeavor is essentially intrinsic. Placement team members must deal with concerns including interpersonal problems with colleagues and parents, threats of legal action or involvement in hearings, work overload, role confusion, and resulting stress and burnout (Bensky, Shaw, Gouse, Bates, Dixon & Beane, 1980). Receiving on the job training including feedback on performance, recommendations for improvement, expert answers to questions, and clarification on requirements of the regulations is most often greatly appreciated. When staff members, particularly direct service personnel are given opportunities to make recommendations for change and are included in the decision making process, improved job satisfaction is likely to ensue.

Summary

If special education programs are intent on dealing with the issues of quality, efficiency and cost effectiveness, the operation of placement teams must be improved. It is imperative that effective training efforts at both the preservice and inservice levels be implemented. The inservice training program described here is one approach to that end.

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Planning Activites - Table 1

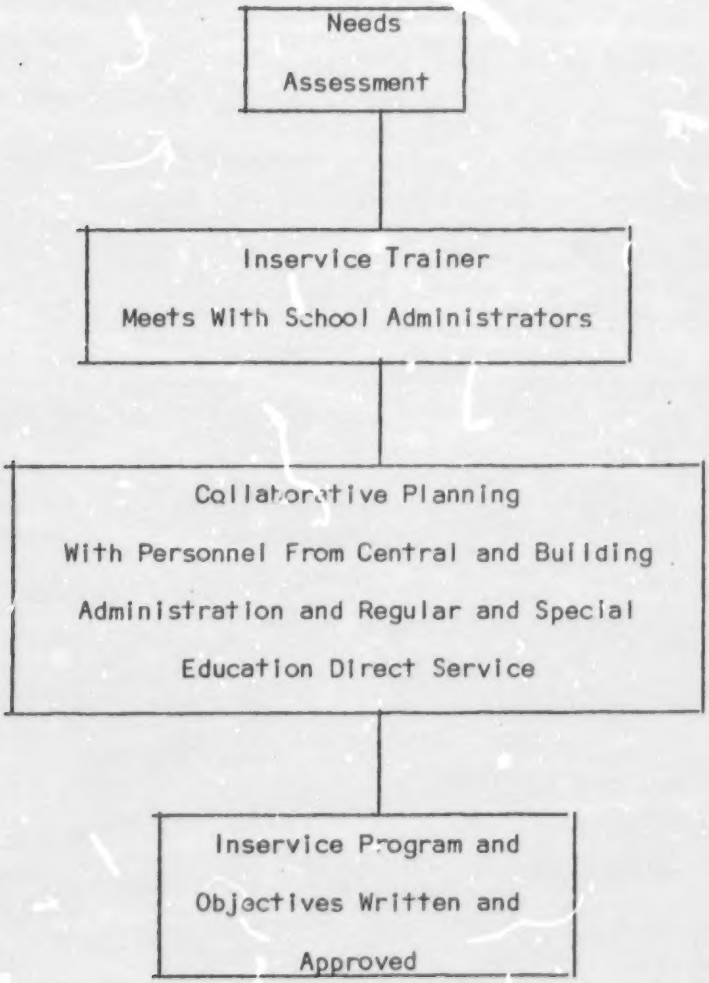

Table 2 Sequence of Inservice Activities

Participants	Topic or Activity
1. Board of Education and/or Central Administration	The importance of and problems with placement team process in relation to effective and cost-efficient special education programming
2. Building Principals	a. the role of principals in effective schcol based placement teams b. discussion and planning of ongoing inservice activities
3. Placement Team members in each school	a. review of random special education records (IEP's, psycho-educational evaluations and team minutes b. OBSERVATION AND CRITIQUE OF SEVERAL TEAM MEETINGS IN EACH BUILDING c. feedback to team members and question/answer opportunity
4. All personnel listed above	consultant's preliminary evaluation of district placement team operation and recommendations for change presented to everyone
5. Principals and key placement team members	discussion and review of evaluation and plans for implementing changes
6. Board of Education and/or Central Administration	discussion of final evaluation report and suggestions for changes in policy, procedures, and staffing;

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